Divided Muslims

BY H U M A Y U S U F | 2/10/2020

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| SINCE the annexation of India-held Kashmir in August, Pakistan has had to realise that it lacl(s the resources diplomatic, economic, legal or otherwise to respond to India`s unilateral action. Saudi Arabia`s refusal to back Pakistan`s calls for a special meeting of the OIC`s foreign ministers to discuss Kashmir reiterates this. But it also raises other serious questions.  The kingdom`s reluctance is not surprising.  Gulf states are unlikely to organise a session critical of India at a time when cultivating close political and economic ties with New Delhi. Who could forget that in the wake of the Kashmir crisis, Saudi Aramco proceeded with an investment in India`s Reliance Industries, while the UAE bestowed a prestigious civilian award on Narendra Modi? It is grating then that Saudi Arabia critiqued Malaysia`s hosting an Islamic summit in December, arguing that issues pertaining to the Muslim world are best raised through the OIC. By avoiding raising Kashmir at that platform, Saudi Arabia is quashing dialogue on the crisis.  There are broader dynamics within the Muslim world that minimise the likelihood of a joint voice on Kashmir. Some of these are traditional sectarian and regional divides, and varying levels of democratic accountability within the member states. These factors are exacerbated by multiple Muslimmajority countries vying to emerge as power centres within the Muslim world. This competition goes beyond the Saudi-Iran binary as countries such as Turl(ey, Malaysia and Qatar seek to wield greater influence. It is no coincidence that the latter three have been vocal opponents of India`s actions in Kashmir.  This fragmentation, and the resulting weakening of the OIC, is problematic at a time when multilateral institutions are needed more than ever. The challenges of the 21st century ranging from climate change and dislocated populations to resource scarcity and internet regulation require cross-border solutions. At the same time, multilateralism is threatened by populism and nationalism.  Rather than facilitate cooperation, powerful states are increasingly seeking to capture multilateral and global governance institutions in service of their own interests: consider China`s attempts to gain control of UN organisations such as International Telecommunications Union and, imminently, the World Intellectual Property Organisation as a way to promote Beijing, access proprietary information and facilitate China`s political and economic goals. So it is with Saudi Arabia`s insistence on dominating the OIC and its agenda.  The timing for such politicking at a multilateral platform is poor. The OIC has animportant role to play as Muslims around the world Kashmiris, Palestinians, Rohingya, Uighurs, and more f ace horrif ying humanitarian crises. A coordinated response is also required to the normalisation of Islamophobia in Western democracies, whether in the form of Trump`s travel ban or the laissezfaire approach to Tory party representatives` routine Islamophobic comments.  The OIC`s failure so far to issue a powerful coordinated response to the Kashmir crisis is a reminder that for most Muslim-majority countries, the platform offers space to project fantasies of stewardship of the Muslim world in service of domestic political considerations, rather than a forum for collective action. The OIC is where leaders such as Mohammad bin Salman, Recip Tayyip Erdogan, Mohamad Mahathir, and even our own prime minister grandstand in an effort to portray themselves as key leaders of the Muslim world for constituents back home.  This reality underpins the concern that religious affinity is not sufficient to drive a col-lective political agenda or facilitate joint strategic planning.  Pakistan`s national narrative has the country leaving the Indian federation`s pluralism for the unity of the Muslim world. The current political trajectory in India, particularlythe blatant discriminatio gainst Ñ[uslims enshrined in the Citizenship Act, has enabled many to justify the rightness of the first choice. But as the political idea of the ummah comes into question, Pakistan`s identity and foreign policy will face existential questions, such as what is the need for faith-based statehood, if sharing a religious identity cannot translate into common ground or joint strategy in the global political arena? This on-again, off-again experience of the Kashmir discussion at the OIC is yet another reminder to Pakistan to overhaul its foreign policy and move on to a multifaceted approach that is proactive and assertive, driven by Pakistan`s own interests (and not just vis-à-vis counterbalancing India, but more broadly from the perspectives of trade, energy, connectivity and climate crisis management). To do this, Pakistan will have to start with some introspection and ask what it can bring to each bilateral relationship to meaningfully have leverage. Are we up to that challenge? The writer is a freelance joumalist.  huma.yusuf@gmail.com Twitter: @humayusuf |